

February 8, 2013

Comments in Support of HB ~~379 and 380~~

Introduction: I am Michael Collins, a 24 year resident of Whitefish, past President and CEO of Winter Sports Inc. and the Current Chair of the Whitefish Library Board of Trustees.

Back in 2010 there was a growing group of Whitefish residents that were concerned about the direction the Flathead County Library System (FCLS) was taking the Whitefish Library. While FCLS were doing a good job of implementing technology advances in all of the system libraries (main and branches) there was very little effort to celebrate and nurture the individual nature of the communities that were served. In short, it seemed like the "one size should fit all approach" was being applied to the libraries within the system. Community likes and dislikes were not factored in to the management / decision making at the System level. Our concerns and ideas were voiced on numerous occasions, but were summarily dismissed by the board trustees and management.

In an effort to meet the library needs of our community, reflect the values of the residents, and preserve some of the historic materials of Whitefish, the community made the decision to consider becoming an independent library. This decision was not taken lightly. In fact a committee spent 8 months preparing a report that looked at 5 alternatives and provided input from anyone living in or around Whitefish. In the end, the recommendation to Whitefish City Council and the FCLS Board of Trustees was for Whitefish to terminate the Inter-local agreement and become an independent library. In June 2011, Whitefish Community Library became independent. Today Whitefish has a very strong Community Library that reflects both the needs and desires of our area residents (some living within the city and some beyond).

WHY HB 379 and 380?

The Whitefish Community Library would like to voice strong support for both of these bills for the following reasons.

1. **Self Determination-** A basic tenet in our country is that we have the right to self determination. In the case of our libraries, if a segment of the population is interested and willing to take on the responsibility of managing, funding and guiding this community resource, then there should be a provision in our state statutes that allows for this to happen. Clearly all of our many school districts were established under this very same tenet. Why should a library district be any different?

2. **Geographical Areas Served-** Montana is comprised of Counties that encompass large geographic areas and often with several communities. Just as each county has legislators to represent the interests of a geographic constituency, why should we not also allow smaller constituencies within each county to determine if they want to govern their library, and if so, how they want to govern? If the residents are interested and willing to manage a library in their geographic area, and are prepared to fund the library, then why would a County not want to agree to their request? The local library district board would then be directly responsible to the people they serve.
3. **Maintain Local Uniqueness and Character-** A library is a unique asset within the community. In addition to providing access to books, electronic media, and linkage to a broad array of other libraries throughout the state, they also serve as the repository for many community historical items. These include special books that are out of circulation, old newspapers, old photographs, and various memorabilia that area residents have donated. Most of these items are one of a kind, and the community library is often the only place that the residents are comfortable in gifting these items to. They want to know that their families and future generations will be able to see (and use?) these materials in the future. These materials help to define the character of the community from which they came.
4. **Same Basis as School Districts-** These two bills together, allows a geographic area within the State to establish a Library District similar to our long standing School Districts. The governance and funding mechanisms are the same. Residents decide if they want to have control and responsibility for the library that serves their area. Once a vote is taken, the majority of the work will be done by the residents of the area served. The County or Counties in which the district is located will not have any more work load than that done for a single school district. Like School Boards Trustees, the Library Board of Trustees are accountable to the residents they serve.

KA
B. Snook